

ABC NEWS REPORTS

"John Scali, ABC News"

Thursday, August 13, 1964  
(10:30-11 P.M., EDT)

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SMITH: October 1962. U-S missiles are on the alert. American marines and soldiers stand by for action against Communist troops. A U-2 has returned with photographs of offensive missile sites being readied in Cuba.

In Washington, an urgent phone call is received by an ABC Newsman...a call from Mr. X.

ANNOUNCER: "ABC NEWS REPORTS". A close look at people and events. Tonight, "John Scali, ABC News"...the story of the major role played by ABC Diplomatic Correspondent in the negotiations to preserve peace during the Cuban missile crisis.

Your reporter is Howard K. Smith.

SMITH: Good Evening. Everybody knows that reporters are lucky people who get to have front-row seats at great and stirring events. But sometimes the public does not know that a reporter -- if he is known to have the best contacts and reliable judgment -- can be yanked out the front row and thrust into a major role in the event itself.

Perhaps the most important case ever of a newsman being transformed from an observer into a maker of history...was the case of our man in Washington -- ABC's diplomatic correspondent, John Scali.

It happened during the most serious international crisis of recent years, the Cuban missile crisis of 1962....and Reporter Scali played a key role in bringing it to an end without war.

John Scali's unsought top-secret mission has just been made public in the current issue of Look Magazine. We will be proud to recount it when we continue with tonight's "ABC News Reports" story in just one minute.

SMITH: The first warning comes from Cuba. Refugees and informants tell of a Soviet military build-up on the island -- they say that long-range offensive missiles are being shipped in at night.

Senator Kenneth Keating of New York makes a detailed charge:

SENATOR KEATING: Close to five thousand men in Soviet uniforms, munitions, armored trucks, electronic equipment and other supplies have been unloading ninety miles or less than a hundred miles off the shores of the continental United States. Now I'm sure the Administration must have been fully aware of what has been going on in the past month, yet they've remained silent on the threat to our security now festering in Cuba.

The Monroe Doctrine, which has been a cornerstone of American foreign policy has been violated. An alien military power has established a base in the Western Hemisphere.

SMITH: During a visit to the White House, Soviet Foreign Minister Gromyko is asked about offensive missile bases, and denies they exist. He claims that all Russian arms bound for Cuba are defensive. But all this time President Kennedy has photographs of the missiles in his desk -- and he talks to the nation in a somber warning to the Russians:

PRESIDENT KENNEDY: Within the past week unmistakable evidence has established the fact that a series of offensive missile sites is now in preparation on that imprisoned island. The purposes of these bases can be none other than to provide a nuclear strike capability against the Western Hemisphere. I've directed that the following steps be taken immediately to halt this offensive buildup: A strict quarantine of all offensive military equipment under shipment to Cuba is being initiated; all ships of any kind bound for Cuba from whatever nation or force will, if found to contain cargoes of offensive weapons, be turned back. It shall be the policy of this nation to regard any nuclear missile launched from Cuba against any nation in the Western Hemisphere as an attack by the Soviet Union on the United States requiring a full retaliatory response upon the Soviet Union.

SMITH: The immediate result of the President's speech is an apparent backdown by the Soviets. Several freighters are observed by our patrols to stop in their tracks, one is boarded and allowed to pass. But from behind the pink walls of the Kremlin there is no direct response to the President's speech.

Castro is bellicose...uncompromising...his answer is belligerent.

In this tense, critical time, ABC Diplomatic Correspondent John Scali gets an urgent phone call...to lunch with a man he knows to be the chief of Soviet intelligence in the United States...the man we call Mr. X. The lunch meeting is at the Occidental restaurant...two short blocks from the White House.

JOHN SCALI: I'd already had lunch when Mr. X called, but his voice was so urgent and insistent that I decided to come immediately. When I arrived he was already sitting at the table as usual, facing the door. He seemed tired, haggard and alarmed in contrast to the usual calm, low-key appearance that he presented.

I had lunch with him eight times previously before the Cuban crisis blew up. He is a man of medium height, in his late forties, who spoke and understood English very well.

He never spoke when there was a waiter around. After the waiter had taken our order he came right to the point and said, "war seems about to break out, something must be done to save the situation."

And I said, "well, you should have thought of that before you introduced the missiles into Cuba."

He sat in silence for a moment and he said, "there might be a way out; what would you think of a proposition whereby we would promise to remove our missiles under United Nations inspection, where Mr. Khrushchev would promise never to introduce such offensive weapons into Cuba again? Would the President of the United States be willing to promise publicly not to invade Cuba?"

I said that I didn't know.

He said, "you find out immediately from your high level State Department friends."

I said I didn't know, because after all, the crisis was going on red hot now and I didn't know whether I could get to the Secretary.

On this point he didn't have to play games because he knew that I had accompanied Secretary Rusk on all the overseas missions, I had interviewed him frequently and if I really and truly wanted to I could get to him.

After going over the proposition he advanced three separate times to make sure that there was no misunderstanding, I said, "well, maybe I could try and find out."

He said, "you must." And then he reached into his pocket and wrote his home telephone number. He said, "if I'm not at the Embassy call me here, this is of vital importance."

I said, "well, I would do what I could," but that I did not know whether I could reach the Secretary or anyone in the American government at this particular time.

The lunch ended pretty much in silence and after forty minutes of sitting here chit-chatting; and, incidentally, he got my crab cakes and I wound up with his pork chop but he didn't notice it. I then went direct to the State Department to see Roger Hilsman.

SMITH: Roger Hilsman, former state department intelligence chief and now a professor at Columbia University, reveals Scali's role in the missile crisis in the current "Look". He describes his meeting with Scali to Piers Anderton:

HILSMAN: We first learned of missiles in Cuba on October 15th. He came to me on the night of October 26th. It was a time when we realized more and more that a confrontation between the Soviet Union and the United States of perhaps dire consequences could not long be avoided.

I remember all that day over and over again we kept repeating we've only got 24 or 48 hours more. If something doesn't

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happen, some break doesn't come we just couldn't avoid a direct confrontation between American forces and Soviet forces. Probably in the air or at sea, perhaps even on the ground in Cuba. So it was at a crisis point within the Cuban crisis that Scali first came to me.

ANDERTON: And was Scali this solution that you had been looking for?

HILSMAN: Well, very typically of the way the Soviets act in emergencies of this kind, late that evening, late in the afternoon of Friday, October 26th, a long cable began to come in from Khrushchev to President Kennedy. It was a four-part cable. Now it was just about the time that the first part of this cable came through early in the evening that Scali came to me with the other message. Now it's when you put the two side by side that the real significance of what Scali had to say came through. Because Khrushchev was talking about looking for a way out of the missile crisis, but there was nothing specific in it, you see. It was just a tone of looking for a solution but with nothing concrete. It was through the Scali-Mr. X approach where Scali came to me with the very concrete and specific proposals for solving the missile crisis, that we couldn't get any further with Khrushchev without something hard and concrete.

So I think they wanted an informal, if you will, an approach that was deniable and so they went through Scali. I think they picked John because he's a very respected newspaper man in Washington, long experience there, and because he was known to have friends at the very highest levels of the State Department.

SMITH: As Scali puts his diplomatic contacts to use...and the foreign offices of both the Soviet and the United States work to come to some solution of the crisis short of war...civilian America was reacting. Civil defense shelters were rushed to completion... identifying signs are put up. Trucks move emergency food supplies for large public fallout shelters in urban areas. And individual house-holders stock their own shelters...and their own larders...there is panic buying...cleaning off the shelves of supermarkets.

At this stage.... Mr. X is summoned from the Soviet Embassy for a second meeting with Scali...just a half-block away at the coffee shop at Washington's Statler Hilton Hotel. Scali has new instructions.

SCALI: I met with Mr. X. here over a cup of coffee at exactly 7:35. I repeated word for word the message Secretary Rusk had asked me to deliver, a message which I have here and which in essence says that the United States might be interested in such a deal if the Soviets would bring up the matter in discussions with Adlai Stevenson in New York. I had the message at the time in my pocket but I didn't show it to him because I had memorized it. Nor did I disclose that Mr. Rusk personally was the author of the message.

Repeatedly he pressed me as to the identity of the persons that were passing on this word. I declined to tell him, saying only as per instructions, that it came from the highest circles of the American government.

At one point he said that if he passed on this message and it did not come from the highest circles of the American government he could be made to look like a fool at a critical moment; and I replied if I lied about this at this critical moment when the world seemed to be on the verge of war I would have to be the world's most irresponsible man.

Finally he seemed satisfied to the authenticity of the message. At this time he then tried a Soviet negotiating trick. He tried to up the ante. If there was to be international inspection of the Soviet missiles in Cuba he said why shouldn't there be simultaneous inspection of the American mobilization on the coast of Florida?

I said I had no information on this, nor did I have any instructions. But that as a reporter I could see that this would create a new and terrible complication because it was the Soviet missiles in Cuba that were threatening the peace, not the defensive American mobilization in Florida.

He pressed this point for awhile and then finally gave up when I said that time was very very urgent, whereupon he got up and said, "very well, I will promise to pass this message on immediately to the highest Soviet leaders, and simultaneously to Mr. Zorin at the United Nations."

We then went to the cashier's booth where he paid the check for the coffee. If I remember rightly it was thirty cents. He put a five dollar bill on the counter and raced off without waiting for the change. I followed him; the entire meeting took twenty minutes.

SMITH: The situation at this point looked brighter -- but overnight it was to take a drastic turn for the worse. We'll be back with that story when we return with more on "ABC News Reports" following this message.

The morning after Scali's coffee shop meeting with the Soviet agent began the blackest day of the crisis. The optimistic mood of the night before now turns almost to despair.

A belligerent note...broadcast on Radio Moscow in Premier Khrushchev's name changes the outlook. It demands a swap of Cuban missiles for our missile sites in Turkey and Italy. Almost simultaneously a U-2 is shot down by Soviet-manned anti-aircraft missiles in Cuba...another U-2 strays over Russian Siberia. At this critical, almost desperate moment, Secretary of State Rusk calls Scali...tells him to meet again with Mr. X. Scali called Mr. X to the Hilton Hotel again ...

I took him upstairs to this deserted ballroom because I was angry and I knew that I might be raising my voice, thinking that perhaps I had been used by the Russians to deceive my own country.

He appeared as nervous and worried as I was angry as he sat there in that chair. I immediately went to the point and said. "well, what's the answer? Why the flip-flop? The new Khrushchev message which demands that we swap the missiles in Cuba for those American missiles in Turkey and Italy."

I said, "if you think that offer is acceptable you have underestimated and misjudged American determination colossally. "That offer," I said, "is unacceptable now, tomorrow and ad infinitum." That if they wanted to discuss that sort of disarmament arrangement they should take it up in Geneva, not to seek to make it part of any last-minute package deal.

He said that, well, the only explanation he had was there had been a delay in Khrushchev's receiving his message of yesterday, that there had been so many messages moving back and forth and that his might have been sidetracked.

I literally exploded at that. I said as a reporter I found that very difficult to believe. The only conclusion I could come up with was that there had been a doublecross and that he was involved. He protested no, there hadn't been any doublecross, that he and the Ambassador were urgently waiting word from Khrushchev at any moment and I must report it immediately to the highest American officials.

I said I didn't believe it, I didn't know if anyone else would believe it, but I would do so. I immediately typed out a two-page, single-space memo and was taken to the White House by a side door into the inner office of President Kennedy.

Next door, a few feet away, he was presiding over an emergency Ex-Com meeting where his top military and diplomatic advisors were trying to decide at that moment whether to send American planes into Cuba to knock down that Soviet missile which had shot down the American plane.

My report was taken into the meeting and read, and I have reason to believe that it was a factor in delaying the decision to strike immediately. That, plus the big question mark, which was had Nikita Khrushchev actually been thrown out of power and did this new and tougher message come from a group which had put it out in his name but which actually was now calling the signals in Moscow?

SMITH: Scali's appearance at the White House during these top level meetings surprised then-Presidential News Secretary Pierre Salinger. Now a Senator, he remembers these hours in an interview with John Rolfson.

ROLFSON: Senator Salinger, what did you think when you saw John Scali sitting at the door of the President's inner office that Saturday afternoon?

SALINGER: Mr. Rolfson, I was frankly amazed. We had the highest possible security around the White House during the period of the Cuban missile crisis, and I walked in the office and John was sitting there, and I immediately rushed out of the office. I didn't want to say anything to John because he's an old friend and I didn't want to offend him, but I immediately sought out, as I recall, Secretary Rusk, and asked him if he knew what Mr. Scali was doing there. He said, "Don't worry about it, he's doing something important."

I might say that at that time, as you know, we were having some problems in direct communication and in fact on several occasions we put out communiques or news bulletins on radio and to the press as a way of communicating with the Soviet Union. And the lack of communication between the Soviet Union and the United States at that time eventually led to the establishment of the hot line.

So that any intelligence that we could get, any information that we could get, was of extreme value and of course John's information was outside the ordinary.

ROLFSON: I understand that the President at one time offered to write a private memo on this incident; is that correct?

SALINGER: He did. The President felt that because of the circumstances involving the information and how it had come to us that it would not be in the national interest to publish the information and to publicize John's role. So he offered to write a letter to John which could be published after a certain period of time. I do not recall exactly, but I think probably after the President's tenure in office. But Mr. Scali declined that offer and of course you know the information has now become public.

SMITH: In the agonizing hours that follow, Robert Kennedy untangles the dilemma. At his suggestion the President publicly accepts the formula relayed through Scali, ignoring anything else. Khrushchev agrees...leading to a sight the world will long remember... Soviet missiles leaving Cuba while American planes swoop low to inspect. And reconnaissance photos showing the now-dismantled missile sites. Robert Kennedy summed up Scali's role for Piers Anderton...

ANDERTON: Did you know about John Scali's role at this time?

KENNEDY: Yes. I met with him on three different occasions during this period when he had the conversations with the representative of the Soviet Embassy and I in turn had conversations with President Kennedy about what he disclosed to me and I think Dean Rusk.

ANDERTON: Why did the President rely on such an unexpected contact?

KENNEDY: Well, I think that at this time we were on the brink of a nuclear war which could have destroyed not only many tens of millions of citizens in the United States but all over the world, and whatever way, manner, that could be developed to try to prevent that kind of a holocaust, President Kennedy was willing to try.

I might say that during the thousand days in which he was President these kind of efforts were made through other people to have an opening to the Soviet Union, and the same thing was attempted by Mr. Khrushchev to have an opening to President Kennedy, a more direct personal opening to President Kennedy and the United States government.

ANDERTON: What was President Kennedy's estimate of Scali's role?

KENNEDY: Well, I think he felt it was very important and I don't think it was made public, but on two different occasions he personally thanked Mr. Scali, and on a number of occasions he spoke to me about the fact that he felt that what Mr. Scali did and the way he handled it was very, very helpful.

ANDERTON: Do you think that he handled it in a diplomatic way?

KENNEDY: Very well. And of course as a newspaper man he gave up a rather major scoop in the interest of national security and in the interests of the country. And the fact that this has been kept quiet and confidential all this period of time I think is a great, great tribute to Mr. Scali.

SMITH: We'll have the story of a fourth, more relaxed meeting between Scali and Mr. X when we return with a concluding word on tonight's "ABC News Reports" coverage in just one minute.

Sunday, the threat of nuclear war passes. East and West relax. That Evening...Scali meets Mr. X for dinner...significantly or not the Russian chooses a Chinese restaurant...the Yenching Palace.

SCALI: When I met here with Mr. X, more or less to celebrate over a Chinese dinner Sunday night he seemed for the first time halfway relaxed. The tension was gone and the crisis seemed to be about over.

The first thing he said to me, rather solemnly, was, "I'm under instructions to thank you. The information that you provided Chairman Khrushchev was most helpful to him in making up his mind quickly."

And then he added, with a smile, "and that includes your explosion of Saturday."

He then went on to suggest that in order to benefit from this near disaster from now on Secretary Rusk should meet three times a day with the Russian Ambassador so that they could avoid future crises and what he called future misunderstandings.

I replied that this wouldn't leave Secretary Rusk much time to do anything else, and he said, well, that didn't matter because the most important thing in the world was better Soviet-American understanding.

As I look back on Mr. X my strongest impression of him was that this was not the stereotype that you sometimes see, of the communist carrying a bomb in one hand and the Marxist bible in the other. This was a quiet, reasonable, intelligent man who did not hesitate to depart when he felt it necessary from the standard communist line.

I can never say that he was a friend. I never really and truly sought to develop any deep friendship with him. But I also believe that he genuinely was trying to avert a war which realistically he knew would destroy and devastate his country.

Mr. X went back to Moscow some five months ago for reassignment. My assignment is still the same, the State Department. But now I'm rid of this secret which Secretary Rusk and President Kennedy asked me to keep. I've been a reporter long enough to know that I probably never will get a story to equal this one, and in a way I'm glad, because I think a reporter by nature just isn't built to keep and protect a major government secret for two long years.

SMITH: Reporter Scali has suggested to me that this conclusion might be drawn from his unsought mission.

In the age of Overkill, they still put erasers on pencils... because human beings still make mistakes regularly. In a time like this there ought to be some clear-cut, established, generally accepted means of instant communication between nations.

The hot line between the President and Khrushchev has been set up, largely because of this' incident.

But below the topmost leval communication is still frighteningly slow and inadequate. If our State Department sends a telegram to our Embassy in Moscow suggesting a line of negotiation in a crisis, it takes 18 hours for it to get there.

We at ABC News are proud that our first-rate newsman -- able in this event as in others to get into the inside of events and make scoops--proved to be an even more first-rate citizen who kept his biggest scoop ever secret for two years in the national interest.

But in the future, except in the direst emergencies, we hope governments will find direct channels; and we will keep Scali's scoops exclusive...on our network.

Good night.

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ANNOUNCER: This has been "ABC News Reports;" "John Scali, ABC News." Next week at this time, "ABC News Reports" will bring you "George Gobel, the Man Who..." a tongue-in-cheek tour of Atlantic City, the site of the Democratic Convention, conducted by comedian George Gobel.

John Causier speaking.

This has been a presentation of ABC News.

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Following are credits and' production data for "John Scali, ABC News," an "ABC News Reports" program Thursday, August 13:

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PROGRAM: "JOHN SCALI, ABC NEWS"  
SERIES: "ABC NEWS REPORTS"  
ON AIR: Thursday, August 13 (10:30-11 p.m., EDT).  
PARTICIPANTS: Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy  
Sen. Pierre Salinger (D.-Calif.)  
Roger Hilsman  
John Scali, AEC News Diplomatic Correspondent  
FORMAT: Behind-the-scens of the U.S.-Soviet confrontation over Russian missiles in Cuba in October, 1962. President John F. Kennedy and Sen. Kenneth B. Keating (R.-N.Y.) are seen as the crisis breaks into the news. Three men close to President Kennedy describe the tense events and delicate negotiations, especially the role of John Scali as a go-between from the President and Secretary of State Dean Rusk to the chief Soviet intelligence operative in Washington--which eventually solved the impasse.  
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